

**The Homeland Security Costs of the Biden Administration's
Catastrophic Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence**

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Testimony of Ambassador Nathan A. Sales

Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and Members of the Subcommittee, it is a pleasure to be here today to discuss this important topic.

My name is Nathan Sales. I am the founder and principal of Fillmore Global Strategies LLC, a consultancy that provides legal and strategic advisory services on matters at the intersection of law, policy, and diplomacy. I am also a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, a member of the advisory board at the Vandenberg Coalition, and a senior advisor at the Soufan Group.

From 2017 to 2021, I served at the U.S. Department of State as the Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism. Concurrently, I was the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights (acting) as well as the Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. I previously served at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, and at the U.S. Department of Justice as Senior Counsel in the Office of Legal Policy, where I worked on counterterrorism policy.

I am here as a private citizen, but my testimony is informed by my experiences working on national security and counterterrorism for the U.S. government over the course of two decades. Today I will describe the increasingly grave terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan after the administration's withdrawal from the country in August 2021. I will then discuss the difficulties the United States faces collecting intelligence in post-withdrawal Afghanistan and degrading the terrorist groups that now are able to operate more or less freely in the country. Finally, I will focus on some of the harmful consequences for our homeland security resulting from the withdrawal.

I.

The terrorist threat environment in Afghanistan has deteriorated dramatically since August 2021 – and it is getting worse. Due to a combination of Taliban-provided safe haven, the Taliban's lack of counterterrorism capability, and the absence of sustained counterterrorism pressure from the United States, Afghanistan has become hospitable terrain for a variety of terrorist groups. As of today, the threat seems to be relatively contained within and around the country's borders, but that will not be true for long. According to CENTCOM commander General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, the local ISIS affiliate – ISIS Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K – could carry out "an external

operation against U.S. or Western interests abroad in under six months with little to no warning.”¹ When terrorists have sanctuary, as they now do in Afghanistan, they are able to plot and execute attacks abroad. The longer they enjoy safe haven, the greater the risk they will be able to strike far beyond their borders, eventually including their ultimate goal of hitting the U.S. homeland. We learned this lesson the hard way on September 11, 2001.

While Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is a permissive environment for terrorists in general, two groups are of particular concern: al Qaeda and ISIS-K.

The Taliban and al Qaeda have been allies for more than a quarter century, and al Qaeda is now reconstituting itself in its historic safe haven. Enjoying Taliban sanctuary at the turn of the century, al Qaeda was able to plot and execute a deadly series of attacks against the United States, including the August 1998 attacks on our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the bombing of the USS *Cole* in October 2000, and, of course, the 9/11 attacks. While decades of U.S. counterterrorism pressure decimated core al Qaeda, the group is now rebuilding under the Taliban’s protection. Last year, the United Nations assessed that the Taliban “remains close” to al Qaeda, that the terrorist group “has a safe haven under the Taliban and increased freedom of action,” and that al Qaeda sees Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as a “friendly environment” to raise money, recruit, and train.² Al Qaeda has never abandoned its goal of striking the “far enemy” – i.e., committing attacks inside the United States.

The continued partnership between the Taliban and al Qaeda is perhaps best seen in the fact that, after the U.S. withdrawal, al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri resurfaced in Afghanistan, living in a safe house associated with the Haqqani Network, a Taliban faction that maintains close ties to al Qaeda and is itself a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. The safe house was located in the Shirpur district in the heart of Kabul, a prosperous neighborhood that is controlled by the Haqqanis and is just down the street from the former U.S. embassy.³ The administration deserves credit for eliminating Zawahiri in a July 2022 drone strike. But this episode may be best understood as a tactical victory amid a broader strategic defeat. The key takeaway is that the Taliban felt emboldened to welcome al Qaeda’s leader back to Kabul, and al Qaeda’s leader felt it was safe enough there to accept the offer.

ISIS-K likely represents an even graver threat at present, though for different reasons. While the Taliban considers ISIS-K an enemy, Afghanistan’s new rulers lack the wherewithal to meaningfully degrade the group. One of the most formidable ISIS branches, ISIS-K controls

¹ Quoted in Alexander Ward et al., *Inside the GOP Foreign Policy War*, Politico, Mar. 16, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2023/03/16/inside-the-gop-foreign-policy-war-00087374>. General Kurilla assessed that it would be “much harder” for ISIS-K to attack the U.S. homeland in that timeframe. *Id.*

² United Nations, *Thirteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2611 (2021) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability, and Security of Afghanistan* at 3, 12 (May 26, 2022), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/333/77/PDF/N2233377.pdf?OpenElement>.

³ Shane Harris, *Zawahiri Appeared on His Balcony. The CIA Was Ready to Kill Him.*, Wash. Post, Aug. 2, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/02/zawahiri-drone-operation-kabul/>.

territory in eastern Afghanistan and, like al Qaeda, aspires to carry out attacks across the region, in Europe, and ultimately in the United States.

In the 20 months since the Taliban took power, ISIS-K has conducted a bloody campaign of bombings and other attacks across Afghanistan and even into neighboring Pakistan, seemingly at will. While firm numbers are hard to come by, it is estimated that, since August 2021, ISIS-K has committed nearly 400 attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region, with approximately 330 in the former and around 70 in the latter. These numbers include the 379 attacks claimed by ISIS-K in its magazine al-Naba, plus an estimated 20 additional unclaimed attacks, including bombings of mosques and schools, assassinations, etc. Casualty counts are more difficult to assess but, since August 2021, could be in the range of more than 1,800 killed and many more injured.⁴

For instance, in September 2022, ISIS-K likely was responsible for a suicide bombing at an educational center in Kabul that killed 52 and injured dozens more, mostly young women and teenage girls who were there to take a practice college entrance exam.⁵ (The Taliban subsequently banned women and girls from universities, having previously banned them from high schools and middle schools.) A month earlier, on August 7, 2022, a likely ISIS-K attack in Kabul killed 120 people celebrating the Shia holiday of Ashura.⁶ ISIS-K has also killed Americans. An ISIS-K suicide bomber carried out the August 26, 2021, attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport, killing 13 U.S. service members and some 170 Afghan civilians who were desperately trying to escape Taliban misrule. In the days prior, Taliban fighters had released the bomber from detention at Bagram Air Base,⁷ along with as many as 5,000 other suspected terrorists.⁸

Many of ISIS-K's attacks have targeted Afghanistan's Hazara minority, a predominantly Shia community in a largely Sunni nation, in an apparent effort to inflame sectarian tensions. Beyond the intolerable bloodshed and risk of further instability in Afghanistan, ISIS-K's campaign raises the possibility that the Iranian regime might use the attacks as a pretext to intervene in the country, purportedly for the benefit of its Shia co-religionists.⁹ Similar interventions by the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism have left a trail of death and destruction stretching from Lebanon to Syria to Iraq to Yemen and beyond.

⁴ Data collected by the Islamabad, Pakistan-based research platform "The Khorasan Diary" in April 2023.

⁵ Fazel Rahman Faizi, *Death Toll in Last Week's Kabul School Blast Climbs to 52*, AP, Oct. 3, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-afghanistan-religion-taliban-suicide-bombings-5a50c846bbbabf6f2bfa5e64d72d67c0>.

⁶ Weronika Strzyżyńska, *Hundreds of Hazaras Killed by ISKP Since Taliban Took Power, Say Rights Group*, The Guardian, Sept. 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/06/hundreds-of-hazaras-shia-killed-iskp-islamic-state-khorasan-province-taliban-power-human-rights-watch>.

⁷ Eric Schmitt & Helene Cooper, *Lone ISIS Bomber Carried Out Attack at Kabul Airport, Pentagon Says*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/us/politics/kabul-airport-attack-report.html>.

⁸ Oren Liebermann & Natasha Bertrand, *ISIS-K Suicide Bomber Who Carried out Deadly Kabul Airport Attack Had Been Released from Prison Days Earlier*, CNN, Oct. 6, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/06/politics/kabul-airport-attacker-prison/index.html>.

⁹ See, e.g., Colin P. Clarke & Ariane M. Tabatabai, *What Iran Wants in Afghanistan*, Foreign Affairs, July 8, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-07-08/what-iran-wants-afghanistan>.

There is also a significant risk that state-of-the-art American military equipment could fall into terrorists' hands. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, in its haste to leave Afghanistan by the White House's August 31, 2021 deadline, the military left behind nearly **\$7.2 billion** worth of vehicles, weapons, and other gear. That includes:

- Over 40,000 Humvees, armored combat vehicles, and other ground vehicles worth **\$4.13 billion**;
- At least 78 aircraft worth **\$923.3 million**;
- Over 300,000 machine guns, rifles, and other small arms valued at **\$511.8 million**;
- More than 1.5 million rounds of specialty munitions valued at **\$48 million**; and
- Night-vision goggles, biometric identification systems, and other specialized equipment worth some **\$200 million**.¹⁰

Terrorists in Afghanistan and beyond could well gain access to this equipment. Nor would it be surprising if these arms end up being sold on the black market to drug cartels, mercenaries like Russia's Wagner group, or hostile foreign governments.

These threats are compounded by the fact that Afghanistan no longer has professional counterterrorism forces able to protect its population. The Taliban is not capable of doing so, and the Afghan security services that the United States helped build over the years did not survive the withdrawal. During my time at the State Department, the Counterterrorism Bureau invested significant resources in training and equipping elite police units to respond to terrorist attacks in real time, and collect evidence for use in criminal trials or for intelligence purposes. You may recall the diabolical ISIS-K attack on a maternity ward in Kabul in May 2020, during which 24 people were gunned down in cold blood, including mothers and newborn babies. It was one of our units that responded to that incident, neutralizing the attackers and saving countless lives.¹¹ After August 2021, these units ceased to exist.

II.

Just as the threat environment in Afghanistan is growing more dire, the United States finds itself severely constrained in collecting intelligence about terrorists in the country and taking meaningful action against them. Our ability to monitor terrorist threats in Afghanistan has been significantly degraded by the withdrawal, and we are no longer able to conduct a sustained kinetic campaign against groups active there.

To dismantle a terrorist organization, or prevent a defeated one from rebuilding, all levels of the group must be subjected to a campaign of low intensity but persistent military force. One-off drone strikes are not enough. What's needed is a sustained effort to eliminate the group's leadership and infrastructure, its training camps, its foot soldiers, and so on. (To be sure, kinetic

¹⁰ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed* at 65, 66 (Feb. 2023), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf>.

¹¹ Nathan A. Sales, *Counterterrorism in the Trump Administration and Beyond*, Jan. 14, 2001, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/counterterrorism-in-the-trump-administration-and-beyond/index.html>.

action alone cannot enduringly defeat a terrorist group. It must be accompanied by civilian-sector efforts including economic sanctions, criminal prosecutions, border security tools, and counter-radicalization programs, among others. Military force is necessary but not sufficient.) Such a kinetic campaign in turn depends on capabilities and resources that include drones and other strike assets to carry out operations against targets; local partner forces that U.S. operators can work by, with, and through; and exquisite intelligence collection capabilities. Effective counterterrorism operations do not, however, necessarily require extensive American ground forces. The U.S. dismantled ISIS in Iraq and Syria by supporting local partner forces with a relatively modest number of operators on the ground and overwhelming air power. We used a similar strategy to rout al Qaeda in Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 before shifting to a more ambitious mission in the country and the heavier military footprint that came with it.

When it comes to intelligence, counterterrorism operations typically rely on a combination of signals intelligence (SIGINT) to eavesdrop on terrorist communications; robust human intelligence (HUMINT) operations to penetrate terrorist networks; extensive use of ISR platforms (“intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance” or, more colloquially, drones); and other sources and methods. These capabilities allow the U.S. to uncover plots, identify targets, and develop a “pattern of life” that enables the precise use of force to remove targets from the battlefield while reducing the risk of inadvertent harm to civilians to the greatest extent possible.

The United States has lost a great deal of counterterrorism capability in Afghanistan, and a so-called “over-the-horizon” strategy – under which strike assets that are based hundreds of miles away fly occasional sorties into Afghanistan – is a poor substitute. Simply put, it is not possible to systematically degrade a terrorist group from over the horizon.

Counterterrorism strikes depend on intelligence and, with no military or diplomatic presence on the ground in Afghanistan, it is far more difficult to monitor terrorist groups as they rebuild, train, and plot. And with U.S. drones now required to fly many hours round trip from and to their bases in distant countries, leaving precious little time to loiter on station, it is far more difficult to eliminate terrorists even when they can be located. The killing of Ayman al Zawahiri was a great success, but it is the exception that proves the rule. To date, the Zawahiri operation remains the lone acknowledged counterterrorism strike in Afghanistan since August 2021. One drone strike in 20 months is not a viable counterterrorism strategy. No wonder some members of the national security community, believing over-the-horizon to be a fantasy, have taken to disparaging it as “over-the-rainbow.”¹²

The limits of over-the-horizon counterterrorism may be best illustrated by the fact that, nearly two years after the Kabul airport bombing, its perpetrators remain essentially at large. The day of the attack, President Biden promised the attackers “[w]e will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay.”¹³ Twenty months later, the administration has yet to

¹² Jonathan Swan & Zachary Basu, *Red Flags for Biden’s “Over-the-Horizon” Strategy*, Axios, Sept. 12, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/09/12/afghanistan-counterterrorism-over-horizon-biden>.

¹³ Kevin Liptak, *Biden to Kabul Attackers: “We Will Hunt You Down and Make You Pay”*, CNN, Aug. 26, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/26/politics/biden-kabul-attack/index.html>.

make good on the president's threat, and part of the reason it has failed to do so is because it lacks the capability to do so. America's fallen warriors and the families they left behind deserve better.

III.

The harms from the administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan will not be limited to that unfortunate country. It will have profound consequences for the security of our homeland as well. With the United States no longer able to count on robust intelligence flows from Afghanistan, our traveler vetting and border security systems will be less effective at identifying possible threats. What happens in Afghanistan does not stay in Afghanistan.

In the years after 9/11, the United States built a number of sophisticated systems to identify suspected terrorists and other potential threats attempting to enter the country. For example, federal agencies use a variety of watchlists – such as a database of known or suspected terrorists (KSTs) and the no-fly list – to screen airline passengers, inbound international travelers, visa applicants, and others to assess whether they could be terrorists or otherwise pose a threat to our national security. The United States has signed dozens of agreements under Homeland Security Presidential Directive 6, or HSPD-6, to share terrorist watchlist information with foreign partners. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the State Department collect biometrics such as fingerprints from foreigners entering the United States and applying for visas, respectively, and check them against databases of terrorists, criminals, and other threats. And CBP uses its Automated Targeting System to analyze airline reservation data and other information to screen international travelers entering the country.

These and other systems have proven extraordinarily effective at preventing another 9/11-scale attack on the homeland. But they are only as powerful as the data that is fed into them. For years, the United States has been able to count on extensive data flows from Afghanistan about terror suspects – captured enemy material and “pocket litter” such as thumb drives and mobile phones seized by U.S. special operations forces in counterterrorism raids, biometric data and other identifying information collected and shared by the Afghan government, and so on. But now, without a meaningful presence on the ground to enable unilateral collection and lacking a government partner able and willing to gather and share information with us, our vetting systems have lost some of the data that made them so effective.

This comes at an inauspicious time for our border security. We have seen historic numbers of migrant encounters on our southern border in recent years,¹⁴ and terrorists could easily take advantage of this vulnerability. CBP has reported a dramatic spike in the number of individuals on its Terrorist Screening Dataset watchlist who were apprehended after crossing the southern border: zero in fiscal year 2019, three in fiscal year 2020, 15 in fiscal year 2021, 98 in fiscal year 2022, and 69 so far in fiscal year 2023.¹⁵ And those are just the ones we know about. Furthermore,

¹⁴ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Southwest Land Border Encounters*, Mar. 10, 2023, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters>.

¹⁵ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *CBP Enforcement Statistics Fiscal Year 2023*, Mar. 10, 2023, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics>. The Terrorist Screening Dataset “is the U.S. government’s database that contains sensitive information on terrorist identities.” It “originated as the consolidated terrorist watchlist to house information on known or suspected terrorists (KSTs) but has evolved over the last decade

terrorist organizations have long sought to exploit vulnerabilities in our southern border to carry out attacks inside the United States. In 2011, the Iranian regime attempted to use a Mexican drug cartel to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States by bombing a restaurant in Georgetown.¹⁶ In late 2021, Tehran planned to use a Mexican national with ties to drug cartels to assassinate former national security advisor John Bolton.¹⁷ I am not aware that al Qaeda, ISIS-K, or other terrorists in Afghanistan similarly are currently plotting to attack the homeland by way of the southern border. But if Afghanistan-based terrorists do seek to conduct attacks inside our country in the future, it is safe to assume they will be aware of our border vulnerabilities.

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

to include additional individuals who represent a potential threat to the United States, including known affiliates of watchlisted individuals.” *Id.*

¹⁶ Charlie Savage & Scott Shane, *Iranians Accused of a Plot to Kill Saudis’ U.S. Envoy*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 11, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/us/us-accuses-iranians-of-plotting-to-kill-saudi-envoy.html>.

¹⁷ Nick Schiffrin, *Iranian Man Charged for Trying to Assassinate Former National Security Adviser John Bolton*, PBS, Aug. 10, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/iranian-man-charged-for-trying-to-assassinate-former-national-security-adviser-john-bolton>.